

Our orientation and tasks in social movements

International Committee of the Fourth International

Text adopted by the IC by 40 for, 4 against, 1 abst, 1 nppv. 1.

Why social movements are strategically important

For many years the Fourth International has developed a practice – and to a greater or lesser extent a theoretical understanding – that social movements, in all their diversity, can and often will play an essential role in the struggle for socialism.

There are different forms of social movements: those defending collective working/living conditions (trade unions, neighbourhood movements, peasants/farmers movements, environmentalist movements) or movements of the oppressed (women's, LGBTI, indigenous, racialized, disabled). These movements overlap and intersect in many different ways as do those who are involved in them.

These movements are important because they are the self-organization of those challenging the capitalist system in different ways. The process of self-organization notably in workplaces but also in other collective contexts (educational establishments, neighbourhoods, rural communities, etc or on the basis of shared experience of oppression) encourages the development of class consciousness in challenges to the capitalist system notably employers and the state, politicization, and developing the premisses of a programme for a challenge to the capitalist system and the vision of different society.

While an anti-capitalist party aims to develop a class struggle programme as a synthesis of the demands in the best interests of the exploited and oppressed the development and formulation of those demands comes best from those most directly involved.

We initially developed this understanding in relation to our work in the women's movement and this approach can thus first be found in texts that have been adopted at various Congresses and leading bodies on the question of the struggle for women's liberation and our orientation to building women's liberation movements (Socialist Revolution and the Struggle for Women's Liberation especially Part II The Fourth International and the Struggle for Women's Liberation Our Perspective, Latin America: Dynamics of mass movements and feminist currents especially part III Our Orientation; and Western Europe: Changing forms of the struggle for women's liberation).

The first text, among other things sets out our differences both with those on the left who downplay the oppression of women as women only considering them as wage labourers and those who see patriarchy and class relations as parallel processes, what today we would refer to as dual systems theorists.

As the document argues in response to this first: *"This view gives weight and importance to struggles by women only in their capacity as wage workers on the job. It says women will be liberated, in passing, by the socialist revolution, so there is no special need for them to organize as women fighting for their own demands."*

In rejecting the need for women to organize against their oppression, they only reinforce divisions within the working class, and retard the development of class consciousness among women who begin to rebel against their subordinate status."

Perhaps the main orientation of Part II of the document can be summed up in the slogan "No Women's Liberation without Socialist Revolution, No Socialist Revolution without Women's Liberation."

Our initial analysis was overly based on our experience of the women's

movement in advanced capitalist countries, this was corrected and developed notably with the work on the Latin American women's movement. The general understanding that the specific oppressions will not be overcome simply by a workplace-based fight without the active leadership of the movements of the oppressed leading the way and pointing to the reality of specific oppressions is more generally pertinent.

To a lesser but still significant extent we have also agreed texts which have drawn lessons from struggles of poor peasants and agricultural labourers, of LGBTIQ movements, of struggles around debt and the movements they throw up, around the anti-globalization and anti-war movements and around Indigenous/First Nation and environmental movements as well of course about the continuing role of trade unions. Social upheavals, fightbacks and alternatives, World Congress 2018.

i) Each of these movements and more have their own particular histories and dynamics and current relationship of forces. There are some important differences between social movements of the oppressed and more general social movements. In this text we also seek to draw out some general principles which we think are important.

a) Social movements are a key way of mobilizing sections of the working and popular classes, including the most exploited, oppressed and often marginalized, for social change – including potentially as part of revolutionary change. Social movements are first and foremost the elementary form of organization to defend oneself against the system on social, democratic or discriminatory issues. In this they can be the framework of action of the exploited, represent their social force. People come into action around their own political situation and then through that

Social movements

experience draw more general political lessons. From this point of view work in social movements can and should be a key area for recruitment to our organizations today – and of training comrades particularly those from more marginalised groups in mass work.

Social movements can impact each other – for example climate issues are accepted as part of the trade union agenda in many places in a way they were not a decade ago. They play a leading political role because the resulting mobilizations are places of confrontation against the policies of capitalists and their governments, situations of oppression or exploitation. The cumulative crises suffered in the current ecological, democratic and social situation strengthen the place and weight of social movements.

b) These movements are of strategic importance for us because these mobilizations of the working classes on their demands are the breeding ground for the class struggle and the construction of political relations of forces against capitalism. They are therefore the crucible of transitional anti-capitalist demands.

c) They also have another strategic dimension, which is to be the crucible of self-organization, taking charge of their own interests and political action by the exploited and oppressed themselves. In this they outline what a society based on council democracy; structures of self-organization in workplaces, neighbourhoods and cities might look like. This does not mean that they will be sufficient tools to achieve council democracy – that will of necessity involve a revolutionary organization – but they are an essential prerequisite.

We promote the principles of the Paris Commune (rotation of positions, transparency in accountability and direct democracy in decision-making) to which we add the need to recreate the culture of live broadcasting of any negotiation processes with governments and authorities as a way to put an end to the anti-democratic culture of secrecy.

We fight for the movements to jealously guard their independence from the powers that be, including from parties claiming to be fighting against

the system. The recent experiences of the governments of Lula, Syriza, the Arab Spring, and many others, show the importance of the mass movement being there to guarantee the interests of the exploited.

ii) We therefore seek to champion the building of social movements and to intervene within them, fighting for demands and ways of organizing that take forward an agenda that fights for the interests of working-class people, fighting for a class struggle perspective to be adopted by the movement as a whole. Our militants adopt the attitude of listening to and learning from what other activists rather than assuming we have all the answers.

iii) We fight for the widest possible democracy within social movements and hope to ensure the most exploited and oppressed have a voice for their demands and representation as much as possible. This means that we also fight for clear structures and processes of delegation – arguing against both the “tyranny of structurelessness” and bureaucratization as the best way to actively involve the maximum number of people.

iv) While fighting for the broadest unity of the movement as a whole we do sometimes participate – or even create – an organization/caucus/network of more leftwing forces that develops a common public intervention within a movement on all or some key questions. It is difficult to codify when that is appropriate but some of the relevant circumstances would include where the existing leadership is bureaucratized and failing to act and/or where there is a danger of significant forces (perhaps particularly amongst young people) dropping out of activity because of lack of success. Another context where we might organize with others is in so far as the movement as a whole is not listening to the demands of key sections – eg Indigenous/First Nation people, migrants, trans people etc. Decisions to participate in or create such structures should always be taken collectively through our own organization – either through fractions or commissions to co-ordinate this area of work or through our leadership structures. We

should regularly assess whether this is the right course and that we are able to argue for our own ideas independently and are doing so where this is relevant.

v) We fight for the greatest coordination of social movements around similar demands and themes on an international basis which are widely understood within the movement and make sense at that particular time. We seek to make sure that structures at an international level do not only reflect parts of the movements which have access to funding - a struggle that should be made easier with the development of technology that permits online meetings with translation. We fight to make sure they are genuinely international and reflect the concerns and demands from all parts of the globe and are not dominated by organizations of the global North.

vi) We fight for all social movements to take an intersectional approach without losing focus on their own particular demands.

vii) We fight for co-operation and mutual support between different social movements. We supported the development of the World Social Forums where the general assemblies of social movements were an opportunity for joint declarations highlighting the links and points of convergence of various social movements, including trade union movements. Today that idea is best summed up in the idea of a “movement of movements” – but the idea is not really concretized anywhere at an international level at least.

viii) In different contexts, movements can be faced with the situation where parties that stand on policies advocated by the movements themselves, and in which movement activists and leaders are themselves active, are able to win control of local or even national governments. Movement leaders as activists of these parties may then even be offered and accept posts of responsibility in these governments. Similarly, such governments may offer non-aligned movement activists post arguing they will “represent” the movements.

We argue that the stance of the

movements should be to remain totally independent from all governmental structures. Nevertheless, movements can be faced with the difficulty of how to continue to organize independent mass mobilization faced with a government enjoying popular support that claims to support and implement the demands of the movements.

ix) While our methods of organization within social movements attempt to be as close to the base as possible and for political independence from the state, we are also not opposed in certain situations to putting energy into – or even creating - non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The assessment of whether to do this in the first place and whether to continue needs to be made collectively through the democratic structures of our organization; assessing whether the rules that govern them and the access to funding on balance enhance the political objectives set out below or restrict them.

x) We are in favour of social movements raising the question of power. If they are to be able to do so without becoming lost in leftism or substitutism, they must be sufficiently broad for their strength and nature to objectively pose a confrontation with the power of the ruling class. This was the case with the HIRAK in Algeria, the Arab revolutions, the Indignados in Spanish state, the peasant movement in India and the popular mobilization in Chile, for example. In line with the great revolutionary movements of the last century, we argue that mass movements, with structures of self-organization in the proletariat in particular, are an alternative form of power to that of the bourgeoisie. Classically, we put forward the slogan of the constituent assembly, linked to transitional demands, particularly on social issues - even if this type of slogan has to be adjusted on a case-by-case basis - to defend this perspective.

xi) We believe that democratic social movements should continue to organize even after the seizure of power let alone the achievement of their main demands or a change of government in a 'progressive' direction. We note for example the important experience of the women's movement in Nicaragua

fighting against the corruption of the original Sandinista revolution as well as for the demands of women specifically. It is also highlighted by the difficulties of the landless movement in Brazil in fighting for real agrarian reform against the Lula government in 2005/2006.

2. Reactionary social movements

Within our tradition, we have tended to view social movements as innately progressive. However, we should not ignore the fact that the radical right has a whole tradition of organizing around social questions. Comrades in the Arab world have often spoken about the tradition of fundamentalists organizing social services directed at the poorest sections of society to provide food, medicine etc where the state does not do so. This is also an experience that comrades in Pakistan and even more so in India –where the BJP and its predecessor organizations was built on this basis. Evangelicals in Brazil had a similar trajectory in 'organizing' in the favelas. Pegida is another example as are anti-vax organizations in the Global north as well as antiabortion movements internationally.

In general, these movements have no democracy but are much more like "front" organizations for far-right political parties (see section 3). Where their foundational demands are reactionary, we obviously have nothing to do with them but there may be situations where we might be part of a common mobilization around demands we support while seeking to win their base to a genuine social movement based on democracy and a more rounded and positive programme. In other situations, social movements in which we participate may prefer to call their own mobilizations which can seek to achieve the same thing – it is a question of assessing the relationship of forces and the fact that we do not wish to do anything that give these reactionary movements credibility.

In any case, this reinforces the need to be part of social movements and to fight within them to advance demands and programmes that challenge capitalist policies and the capitalist organization of society, who organize democracy and solidarity, in the face of racist

or reactionary programmes that can try to implement far right ideas which bolster capitalist interests.

3. Errors on the left

Unfortunately, our approach to social movements is not universal on the radical left. There is a long tradition by Stalinist and Maoist organizations rather than building unitary social movements of setting up front organizations, the main purpose of which is not to take the struggle forward but to act as transmission belts for their own parties. While such an approach is not theorized in the same way by other organizations on the radical left both the IST (with the British SWP at its centre) and the CWI (with the British Socialist Party at its centre) have often tended to use the same approach.

In these latter cases the other tendency is that their investment of cadres in these projects tends to be sporadic – and one at a time – based on their judgement not on the objective importance of the issues mobilized around but on their potential to recruit.

This is also true of some organizations not exactly within the same framework – and within which some of our comrades' work. The Left Party in Sweden for example talks about being "the voice of the movements" – but only mean their fronts not broader formations.

Similar things happening in every continent and probably every country which is problematic because it undermines the potential unity of the relevant movement but also because it gives the whole radical left a bad name within those social movements.

At the same time, we should guard against the opposite danger; that our support for the autonomy and democracy of social movements does not result in us failing to promote our overall politics and win militants to our flag.

4. General dangers in the movements

a) Bureaucratization/lack of democracy

There is a real danger of bureaucratization in any social movement unless those who are active at the base have

Social movements

a real impact on the direction of the organization. This is true even in social movements where there are no paid staff or the material conditions of the paid staff are little different to those of the unpaid volunteers. When new organizations are launched, it is usually because there is an urgent common purpose which means many people do not pay attention to these issues – but once mistakes are made it is harder to change afterwards and likely to undermine their ability to sustain themselves long term. When organizations get bigger there is more of a danger as structures become more cumbersome. And some organizations become hostile to discussing ways of avoiding these dangers because they become focused on lobbying and influencing politicians or larger NGOs

b) Clientelism and self-helpism

The 1991 world congress text Latin America: Dynamics of mass movements and feminist currents raised the dangers of both clientelism i.e. the expectation that support for (some of) the demands of the movement will be reciprocated by support for the political party doing so and self-helpism: i.e. the movement providing services that should be provided free by society as a whole.

“Placing demands on the state in relation to social and political problems has the enormous advantage of putting the responsibility where it should be, on society as a whole and its institutions, and more easily gives mass action a political character. Successful struggles and mobilizations advance both their overall consciousness and their strength and confidence in themselves.

Practice has taught us, however, that reliance on the state is not without its dangers. On the one hand there could be a clientelist dynamic and, on the other, in partially winning certain demands women can become absorbed into administrative tasks of providing services.”

It seems to us that such dangers, which the text argues can be most successfully guarded against by fighting for the most thoroughgoing democracy in the movement, are difficulties that all social movements, particularly in countries of the Global South, are likely to be prey too.

At the same time, we are conscious

that sometimes movements organizing to meet people’s immediate needs can be essential in drawing in more forces to activity eg the activity of comrades in Pakistan providing food for released political prisoners who had no other forms of sustenance and where they are the single bread winner for their families while they are in prison. These forms of prefiguration can on other occasions act to successfully put pressure on the state to provide services on an ongoing and or a wider basis eg in Britain in the 1970’s Women’s Liberation groups campaigned for community nurseries and in some cases occupied suitable empty buildings and set them up themselves resulting in such services being introduced by a number of local councils.

c) Ultraleftism/fragmentation

While we are in favour of intersectionality and mutual support – sometimes referred to as ‘a movement of movements’ this is not the same as the movements adopting demands on everything.

So, for example, it is excellent that within La Via Campesina there are women’s and youth sections and specific events taking up their specific needs within the framework of campaigning around land and food sovereignty. On the other hand, within Ende Gelände, the direct-action environmental movement in Germany, some people have suggested it needs to take a position on every political issue going in a way that has the danger of fragmenting and blunting the movement.

5. The rise and fall of the anti-globalization movement

The high point of co-ordination of social movements at an international (and regional) level so far took place through the development of the World Social Forums (WSF) and the regional forums that also developed. The WSF first took place in Porto Alegre Brazil in 2001 and ran annually until 2016. The withdrawal of both the World March of Women and La Via Campesina from the World Council of the WSF around 2005 was both a reflection of and a contribution to the decline in its significance.

The participation curve of the forum was uneven – to some extent reflecting the curves of the major social move-

ments that were involved but also more general political developments. The context was first the cycle of struggles between 1995-2005 and then the cycle after that. It is notable that neither the cycle of struggle which led to the development of the indignados/occupy movements, nor the rise of the Arab spring had the WSF as a major reference point nor led to permanent social movements with international coordination.

The political context of the early forums included major developments in Latin America – building on but centralizing some of the work of the Encuentros in the wake of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994 and also the growth of the PT leading to Lula’s first election in 2003. The massive demonstration against the WTO in Seattle – including the involvement of a significant contingent of trade unionist was also an important factor – as well as the mobilizations against the World Bank, the IMF, and the G8 (Washington in April 2000, Prague in September 2000, Genoa in July 2001) particularly in North America and in Europe. A third key impetus for some of the early forums was the development of a very significant international anti-war movement from the autumn of 2002 protesting against the invasion of Iraq – in advance of the invasion in March 2003 and continuing afterwards. The extent to which political developments following the fall of the Berlin wall opened up a debate about alternatives to capitalism are worth exploring.

These strands were not the only major organizations to be involved in the WSF from the beginning. Other key organizations included CADTM (founded Belgium 1990). La Via Campesina (founded Belgium 1993) Attac (founded France 1998) The World March of Women (founded in Quebec in 2000)

Trade unions and trade unionists supported the project including from the CUT of Brazil, the KCTU of South Korea, WOSA from South Africa, the French CGT and FSU, unions of the DGB such as IG Metall or ver.di, the Belgian confederations FGTB, CSC, in Britain UNITE and RMT, in Italy FIOM, American unions of the AFLCIO around Labor Notes and the current of revolutionary syndicalist unions (CGT of the Spanish State, Italian COBAS, STI, USB, in Brazil

CONLUTAS, Argentina CTA, SUD Solidaires from France, now part of the International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggle.

Following the first forum in 2001, the Brazilian organizations that organized the forum drew up a "Charter of Principles". Two things merit comment: first the attitude to political parties (which in the text are almost always merged with governmental parties) e.g. "Neither party representations nor military organizations shall participate in the Forum. Government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this Charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity."

Further parties were not able to organize workshops as part of the forum or have stands on the site. But the statement also reflects a growth of autonomist ideas within the movement emphasizing the idea of parallel power rather than the need to confront and dismantle the state. The slogan Another World is Possible could be and was supported by currents with different approaches to this and other debates.

A second statement barred the Forums as such from issuing declarations or statements as such but at the same time created the space for the assembly of social movements which could and did do so.

The FI put major resources into the anti-globalization movement, the anti-war movement and into other movements that were involved in the social forum process as well as into the WSF itself. In particular our comrades played a major role into convening the assembly of social movements which issued important declarations from 2005 -2015, which were somewhat at arms-length from the forum itself but never the less had an impact

We should try to assess the extent to which the relative atrophy of the movement in this form was a result of turns in the international political situation (e.g. retreat of Pink Tide, rise of new far right, decline of antiwar movement etc) and to what extent a result of strategic errors from the leadership/dominant political currents in the movement.

6. Conclusion

This text builds on our previous collective discussions on the importance of social movements in the battle for socialism: their strategic importance in mobilizing and politicizing layers of the exploited and oppressed and their development of programmatic elements and demand which enrich our own programme. This is an approach which is a major gain for our political current over decades and to codify it more systematically is an important task. To produce the most comprehensive outcome which impacts on our theory and praxis beyond the Congress itself we need a more broad-based discussion.

It will be important to receive supplementary contributions on the theoretical and practical conclusions derived from this work. We can already indicate a number of themes to be developed:

- do movements of poor peasants, agricultural labourers and farmers challenge the assumptions of early Marxists about the strategic relationship between the proletariat and the peasantry;
- the strategic role of indigenous communities and their essential contribution to other social movements such as the women's and/or environmental movements;
- why the anti-debt movement has had a particular success in extending its international reach during a period where other movements have receded or needed to significantly change focus and or organizational forms.
- the role of reactionary social movements – perhaps particularly from Asia and North Africa;
- the current relationship of forces in the women's and LGBTIQ movements, and any new theoretical challenges we are facing.

We also note that our collective discussion is underdeveloped on two particular questions of oppression – around racism and racialization and around disability.

The former is particularly complex because the history of self-organization is not only very different in different parts of the Global South but also within the Global North. Different historical and current factors such as the nature of the colonial relationships, the presence of a pre-colonial settler

indigenous population, an Afro-descendant population resulting from a slave-owning economy, the different forms and causes of migratory movements, all shape how racism is experienced and the forms of anti-racist struggles and movements. At the same time our responses to the challenges posed by Black radicalism and Black Marxism are underdeveloped. Finally, we have not collectivized the intersection between indigenous and Black self-organization which is important for example in Brazil. Again, it would be important to have contributions on these questions.

On questions of disability, there is a large amount of theorization from a Marxist perspective by disabled people from within the disabled people's movements and individual activist and academics. However, there are fewer intersections between disabled people's movements and other social movements; although there are disabled people's organizations which are intersectional, notably, disabled women's movements. Despite historical weaknesses in organizing disabled people as well as participating either as disabled people or in solidarity with disabled people's movements from the left as whole, it is important that we are consistent champions of the social model of disability. The social model of disability maintains that it is not impairments themselves that are the cause of oppression of disabled people. Rather disability is the social exclusion of impaired people due to needs of capitalist society. We support the autonomous self-organization of disabled people and we must also fight for all social movements and for the left to be organized in ways that are as accessible as possible to disabled people to ensure their inclusion in the left – this means standing in solidarity with the demands of both disabled people's and their organizations and their chosen tactics and demands. This is an area where some of our organizations are doing some work and developing their ideas – and we welcome contributions on this theory and praxis.

Social movements are inevitably being born and reshaped in the context of crisis and upheaval so there may well be many new questions to address.

In particular, it would be remiss to ignore the major development of the

Social movements

movement in solidarity with the Palestinian people that has arisen since 7 October 2023 and the genocidal response of the Israeli state to it. We have made some assessments of the strengths of the movement – including its international spread, the youth and feminization of its leadership, the growing strength of Jewish participation in solidarity with the Palestinian people and the positive relationship of this solidarity movement with other social movements as well as its weaknesses – particularly its relative lack of strength in the Arab world as well as obviously the appalling relationship of forces for Palestinian people as a whole. These assessments need further developing and/or updating in response to subsequent developments.

The understanding and orientation to social movements developed here informs our political activity as the Fourth International at national and international level. ■